

Reaching New Heights

Gatlinburg hiker gets back on the trail with new knees

White Oak Sinks is a beautiful place to be in the springtime. Kelli McCarter recently hiked the Smoky Mountain trail to see the wildflowers there - and to reclaim her life.

It was March 2021 and less than a year after double knee replacement at Parkwest Medical Center.

"Tears of absolute joy," McCarter says when asked about the experience. "I was back in my element."

Years of Pain

It's easy for McCarter to remember when her knees took a turn for the worse. Her home was destroyed in the Gatlinburg wildfires of 2016, so she and her husband lived in a travel trailer during the rebuilding process.

There was a lot of climbing in and out and navigating a smaller living space. What had once been an occasional, nagging twitch of pain became more constant and more intense.



Kelli McCarter is now ready to climb mountains again, thanks to knee replacement surgery at Parkwest.

McCarter was only 48 years old and much younger than the vast majority of knee replacement patients. It was suggested that she was suffering common aches and pains from menopause.

"One night I looked at my husband and I said, 'Menopause is killing me.'"

McCarter had been active and athletic for as long as she could remember. She enjoyed hiking and even trail running five miles a day as an adult. Now she was off the trails and her life was off track.

"I couldn't even walk to my mailbox, and to be so young - it's scary," McCarter says as the tears return. "I thought, 'If I feel like this now, how am I going to feel in 10 years?'"

After a total of six years in pain, McCarter pressed her doctor for a referral to a specialist.

"I said, 'I can't function. I can't go to the grocery store without being in tears by the time I get into my car. I can't play with my grandson. I can't do anything. Somebody needs to figure it out,'" McCarter recalls.

Double-trouble Knees

Parkwest orthopedic surgeon Robert Smith, MD, listened carefully to what his new patient was saying, then ordered X-rays. He confirmed what McCarter had known in her heart. The pain was not menopause-related -- it was caused by her knees.

Dr. Smith told McCarter that her knee joints were broken down to the point where bone was rubbing against bone because of a lack of cartilage.



Robert Smith, MD,
Parkwest orthopedic surgeon

"And he told me I was bow-legged," she says. "Nobody had ever told me that before."

Dr. Smith explained that the shape of McCarter's legs, combined with her active lifestyle, had meant double trouble for her knees.

"It predisposed her knees to wear out at a younger age because there was more stress on them," Dr. Smith explains. "Occasionally that can make knee replacement more challenging, but it's a very common problem to have."

The first step in addressing McCarter's pain was to try steroid injections. When six months passed with no relief, McCarter was scheduled for her left knee replacement at Parkwest in August 2020. Her right knee was replaced last November.

While there would be a few limitations on what McCarter could do after knee replacement, Dr. Smith was confident that she would be able to return to an active life, pain-free.

New Knees and a Renewed Life

"They took excellent care of me," McCarter says of the nurses and staff at Parkwest. "They did everything they could to put me at ease."

McCarter applied the same intensity to physical therapy that she had applied to her athletic pursuits. She buckled down and made strength and range of motion in her knees a top priority.

Dr. Smith and joint replacement at Parkwest have changed McCarter's life as radically as joint pain had changed it in the past. She used to be sidelined and in pain, but now she's ready to dance, to climb mountains and live life to the fullest.

*"I'm so happy and so grateful. I get up every morning... and I smile. I'm not in pain."
- Kelli McCarter*

"I'm just so happy and I'm so grateful," McCarter says. "I get up every morning and my feet hit the ground and I smile. I'm not in pain. Dr. Smith saved me. He gave me my happiness back."

For more information about the orthopedic surgeons who practice at Parkwest Medical Center visit [TreatedWell.com/physicians](https://www.treatedwell.com/physicians), or call (865) 374-PARK (7275).

Is it Right for Me?

You might be a candidate for joint replacement if you have one or more of these symptoms:

- Severe pain during activity, such as walking or getting up from a chair
- Pain that stops you from doing some activities
- Pain at night that prevents you from sleeping

Parkwest orthopedic surgeon Robert Smith, MD, explains that joint replacement becomes an option when the pain radically changes your life.

"Once it's affecting your day-to-day activities and we can't make it better with injections or with oral anti-inflammatory medications, that would be an indication to consider

surgical intervention," Dr. Smith says.

The results of joint replacement surgery are good to excellent for more than 90 percent of patients, according to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS). While most who undergo joint replacement are 60 and older, it's becoming more common for people in their 40s and 50s because of ongoing improvements extending the life of the artificial joints.

Knee replacement earlier in life can help a patient have quicker and better outcomes because the patient has more strength and stamina to persevere through the procedure and physical therapy. Younger patients also may have

fewer chronic health conditions which can complicate surgery.

An artificial knee usually comes with a few limitations. Dr. Smith instructed Kelli McCarter not to run or carry a backpack that was too heavy, but she was free to get on the trails and hike pain free for the first time in years.

"The goal for the surgery is to allow patients to get back to living active, full lives and getting back to day-to-day activities," Dr. Smith says.

Your healthcare provider will tell you about any activities you shouldn't do after surgery. He or she may also tell you to stay away from certain positions to prevent joint dislocation. The

limitations will depend on the joint that is replaced, as well as your personal situation.

Under normal circumstances, artificial joints often last 10 to 15 years or more. A person who is younger at the time of the surgery may eventually need to have another replacement procedure.

The Parkwest Joint Replacement Center offers comprehensive orthopedic care, including joint replacement surgery and follow-up rehabilitation services. Experienced orthopedic surgeons, nurses, clinicians and therapists work together to provide care designed especially for hip or knee replacement patients.

To learn more, visit [TreatedWell.com/Orthopedics](https://www.treatedwell.com/Orthopedics), or call (865) 374-PARK.



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